

## Random Thoughts for the SDS Retreat

*Phil Ferguson*

### I. Thoughts on the future of disability studies

I want to be very practical in my reflections, or at least in whatever recommendations I have for our "retreat." However, I do think that as a field, disability studies has a lot of conceptual work to do. To speculate about the future of disability studies probably entails first that I think about what I mean by "disability studies." Indeed, it seems to me that the discussion over how the term gets used is where we will spend a lot of our time over the next several years. Several thoughts come to mind.

1. Trying to be clear about what I mean when I use the term "disability studies" doesn't entail that I think that is, or should be, the meaning of the phrase. As with all terms that stand for or represent something important to people, "disability studies" gets used in lots of different ways. I am a pragmatist about this. We do different things with words, and the usefulness of different meanings will eventually decide the range of things that disability studies refers to. I don't want to be prescriptive about how people use this term, unless I feel a particular usage falls well outside the tradition.

2. That doesn't mean that "anything goes" and anyone can just claim to mean anything they want to. I've read Lewis Carroll and I'm with Alice on this one. Disability studies has a history, a tradition, and even an emerging consensus, and the range of legitimate usages of the term should be located within those.

2.1. For instance, I think using "disability studies" to refer to clinical programs or training programs in rehabilitation and special education stretches the term beyond what is useful.

2.2. That doesn't mean, of course, that there could not be elements of "disability studies" within such applied fields. In fact, I suspect that is where some of the firmest footholds will be found as we climb our way to academic visibility. I suspect that some of our best potential is in the larger schools/colleges of medicine and education. Many such places already have established programs in things like the history and sociology of medicine, or the anthropology of education. Frankly, this is also where the money is (in terms of research dollars and leadership training grants).

2.3. The disadvantage of trying to embed disability studies in schools of medicine and education is that they will tend to emphasize policy studies and the social sciences over the humanities. So, I think a second parallel track has to be the effort to establish a handful of disability studies programs within colleges of arts & sciences.

3. The tension between advocacy and scholarship will remain. However, I think the emphasis has to shift over the next 5 years to producing more and better scholarship. Most disability studies scholars that I know are also advocates within the disability rights movement. Some combine these roles well in ways that certain African American scholars or feminist scholars do (e.g. Cornell West, Sandra Harding). At least in the short term, though, I think we have to encourage more foundational work in our field that is just good scholarship regardless of how it applies to immediate policy issues.

4. The tension over the legitimacy or value of those with and without disabilities within the field will undoubtedly remain, but it will be a costly debate if it puts up a sign "no TABs" wanted over the field of disability studies. Of course, it also raises the reciprocal possibility of "ghettoizing" disability studies in a way that prevents its infusion into the rest of the academic curriculum. Of course, this in no way diminishes the size of the commitment and resources that are required to overcome the years of overt or systemic discrimination against disabled people gaining access to the academy. There are important issues of substance and symbolism involved in increasing the number and status of disabled scholars. The tension won't go away, but if the field is broken apart over it, then we will be left with people studying disability (with and without disabilities) but "disability studies" as a coherent and legitimized field of scholarship will wither away.

#### The Future of SDS

I interpreted this as a call to speculate about what I think SDS should do over the next 5 years.

1. The top goal seems clear to me. The top priority of SDS has to be to legitimize disability

studies as a recognized field of interdisciplinary study in colleges and universities in both the U.S. and internationally.

1.1. We have missed the crest here that led to the proliferation of analogous programs in women's studies and ethnic studies, but we still have to push. I would like to see us produce a packet of materials that help people start minors or 'programs' based in the liberal arts (bibliographies, course sequences and sample syllabi, student recruitment, faculty resources, funding opportunities).

1.2. I would focus on developing programs at the undergraduate level or at the doctoral level avoiding masters level programs. The undergraduate programs could serve as foundational introductions for people who will go on to work in various applied fields in disability, or who use it as a minor. We need the doctoral programs, though, to produce the research energy and critical mass of scholars. The doctoral programs will probably be easiest to start within the professional schools (education, medicine, public health). The undergraduate programs will probably be easiest to start in the liberal arts areas.

1.3. I would like to see us explore the feasibility of creating some programs in "diversity studies." That is, instead of only exploring the start of totally new programs, let's see if any existing programs in one or another area of "minority" programs would consider expanding their focus to include disability. This would expand the potential student base, possibly add new faculty, etc.

1.4. We have to make some sort of push for a major foundation or federal grant competition to put some major bucks behind this activity for a number of years.

2. A second clear goal that is also very important is for SDS to do everything it can think of to increase the access, participation, and achievement of students with disabilities (and I would add family members here) in the field of disability studies. Obviously, this fits closely with the first goal. We need more quality programs that are turning out scholars in disability studies. We also need more top quality students to go into those programs. The two go hand in hand. I give a slight edge in priority for the next 5 years to establishing a number of solid academic programs.

3. A third goal is to work harder to broaden the coverage of disability studies to include more active participation by those interested in cognitive disabilities (psychological, intellectual, etc.). Simply from a demographic point of view this makes sense. Even more though, there is a huge body of research and history out there, not to mention the scholars producing that research and history, that fits perfectly with the tradition of disability studies, yet is seldom explicitly included. We are still too small and fragile as a field of study to allow this balkanization to continue.

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